

The Stars Over Indiana by flippyspoon

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Summary:

The universe gives Steve Harrington one more chance.

1. Prologue: The Only Living Boy in New York

New York City

1994

Steve had supposedly smoked his last cigarette in 1990 but now he ducked under an awning, away from the rain and lit up, savoring the first drag. It was impossible not to think of Billy when he smoked which was why he'd quit in the first place. He'd told everyone it was for his health but the people who knew him best realized it was bullshit.

He had no umbrella and he tugged Billy's old army jacket around him. Billy must have had an army surplus phase, he supposed. It still smelled like him. Steve leaned against a meter box and stared blankly at a poster for *Les Mis*. The illustration of Cosette reminded him of somebody... Holly. Holly Wheeler. Except Holly Wheeler was not that little anymore. Not that Steve had seen her in a long time. He could mention that to Nancy but it would be an odd thing to mention.

He hated thinking about Hawkins sometimes.

The wind blew rain under the awning and Steve stepped back further to lean against the fruit stand outside a bodega. His hair was long, touching his shoulders. He hadn't cut it in a year. It felt like a tribute.

Steve smoked and couldn't stop himself thinking of the very first time he'd really noticed Billy Hargrove. It had not been in class or playing basketball.

It was that party where Nancy got drunk and broke his heart...

"Got ourselves a new keg king, Harrington!"

And there Billy was; young, beautiful, and full of rage.

"Shout at the Devil" had been playing.

It would figure that Motley Crüe was playing when he first looked into Billy's eyes.

Steve watched the coffee shop across the street as he loitered on 43rd, stomping his booted feet. He checked the time again. Nancy was running a little late. If she stood him up, he was going forward with the plan anyway. That was not in question. But he wanted to tell somebody himself first, somebody other than Eleven. Eleven would tell Mike and Mike would call the rest of The Party.

Steve smiled faintly at the thought of “The Party.”

They’d have something to say about it, but he knew Eleven would do what he asked.

It had already happened anyway. He just hadn’t known it til he’d put it all together a couple of weeks ago, lying on the sublet floor, listening to Metallica again, thinking of Billy Hargrove next to him in the grass, and the stars over Indiana.

“Steve!” Nancy was calling for him. She stood right in front of him, huddled under an umbrella, halfway into the street. Her hair was a big curly mop, a sleek black raincoat was snug around her petite figure. She stepped around a taxi and waved him over to the coffee shop. He nodded and dodged the slow motion traffic, getting rained on.

Steve was still a little dazed and the bell over the door jolted him out of his reverie as he walked into the cramped but warm diner, damp New Yorkers grumbling over their lunch.

“Heeey.” Nancy smiled as she folded up her umbrella, dropping it in the bucket by the entrance. He didn’t miss the way she looked him up and down, her eyes a little wide, her smile faltering just a bit. “So good to see you. I’ve been calling...”

“Yeah, I know...”

He followed her to a booth and she took off her coat and folded it over the back of the booth before taking a seat. Steve didn’t take off his jacket--no, *Billy’s* jacket. He sat down, a little hunched. He grabbed a menu from behind the napkin dispenser and frowned at his options.

The handful of times they'd gone out for burgers, Billy had always ordered his well done with cheese and no lettuce. Coke, extra ice. He'd liked chewing on ice; swirling it around in his mouth as he flicked out his tongue...

Steve thought of Billy lying there with ice chips in his mouth-

He swallowed hard and stared at the menu.

"Sounded like you had something pretty big to tell me," Nancy said.

He couldn't look at her yet.

He had to work up to this.

"Yeah, yeah," Steve said. "How are you though?"

"Oh, good!" She was wearing a nice fuzzy sweater. She was very put together, and looking straight at him. Nancy was always so focussed. "Good students this year."

"Oh...you found a teaching job already?" Steve muttered.

"Hmm? No... Steve." She tapped on his menu, pressing it down so he'd look at her. "I'm a T.A.. Yeah? Grad school still. NYU."

"Oh." Steve shook his head, tried to hide it all with a chuckle. "Yeah no. I know. Just... Wasn't thinking."

The server came along and they ordered: "Cheeseburger, well done. Hold the lettuce. And a Coke with extra ice," Steve said.

Nancy didn't know enough to think that was weird.

"Jonathan had a gallery opening," Nancy said. "Few weeks ago? Tried to invite you, but you screen all your calls and don't call back." She pressed her hands to the tabletop. "I was worried, I almost came over. But *Jonathan* thought you still needed space..." Her mouth was a little tight at that. They must've argued about it.

"Hey, I'm fine," he said. He knew he was totally unconvincing but Nancy was putting in every effort to make things normal while

prodding him where she could. It was sort of sweet.

“Your hair’s so long,” she said. “Look like Eddie Vedder.”

Steve snorted at that. “Right.”

“You working?” Nancy said.

“Aaah.” He slid his menu back behind the napkin dispenser and folded his hands. “I was. Ya know, my parents had a lot to say about me staying here... Dad hooked me up with this small Wall Street firm but I quit that a while ago.” He scratched his ear, looked away at a patron of the diner, an old man blowing his nose.

Nancy nodded. “Well...are you going to...get a job somewhere else or...”

“Nance.” He looked right at her, tapped his fingers on the table. “It’s fine. I have some money saved up.”

“What about after that.”

“I won’t need it,” he mumbled.

Nancy let out a breath and shook her head. “Steve... What the hell does that mean? You can’t...talk like that-”

“I’m not going to kill myself!” Steve said. “Jesus.”

She didn’t look like she believed him.

“I’m *not*,” he said. “I mean I appreciate the concern but...”

“Will you tell me what this is about?”

Their food came, just in time. Steve said, “Let’s eat first.”

One bite into his burger, Steve decided this all might go down easier with food and he said, “Okay. You remember senior year when I fell into the Upside Down, right?”

Nancy raised an eyebrow. “Uh no, I totally forgot about that. Yeah Steve, I remember. What does that have to do with-”

"I'm gonna go back," Steve said. He licked ketchup off his lip.

Nancy frowned at him and shook her head. "Back to Hawkins?"

"Yeah," he said. "Well. Back to the Upside Down."

"What...? Steve-"

"When I was in the Upside Down," Steve said, "I saw The Boss, right?"

"The Boss..." Nancy ate a bit of salad and waited for him to explain.

"The Boss! Ugh. That was what I called the *bigger* Mind Flayer, remember? The Boss Mind Flayer...?"

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that. You didn't explain it very well at the time."

"Well, I was kind of a dumbass back then."

She laughed at that at least.

"Okay," Steve said, and spoke quickly. "So the The Boss Mind Flayer swallowed me up and I was in its heart and felt its connection to all possible realities in the multiverse and then all of time was kind of happening at once and not at all."

"What-"

"And that was the first time we knew about that, right? The multiverse thing, connection to all time bla bla bla. But there hasn't been any portal activity that we know of since then. So what I'm gonna do is go back into the Upside Down and-"

"Steve, stop-"

"And I'll find my younger self there and I'll *tell* him-"

"*Steve.*" She reached over and grabbed his hand. He'd put down his burger, he'd been gesturing emphatically. "What are you talking about?"

Steve took a deep breath and said, "I'm going to ask Eleven to open the Gate so I can go back to the Upside Down and fix everything."

Nancy looked at him for a long time and he didn't know what to do. Then she began to cry. "Oh Steve..."

"No, I..." He rubbed his forehead with the hand Nancy wasn't holding. "I knew you'd think I was crazy but I'm..."

"Steve." She squeezed his hand and sniffed, composing herself. "I know how much he meant to you."

"No, you don't," he said quietly. "You don't. Because I didn't even know until it was too late."

"It's been over a year," Nancy said. "You *have* to try to move on. Get out of that apartment and work or don't work, I don't care. You have to stop living in 1985."

"This isn't a crazy idea," Steve said, trying to get back on track. "And the thing is... I've already done it. It's already happened. I just haven't...finished it."

"What?"

Steve licked his lips and leaned forward over the counter as if imparting a great secret. "So when I fell into the portal senior year... There wasn't supposed to be a portal because the Gate was closed."

"Yeah," Nancy nodded. "I remember everybody freaking out about that."

"Right. But Eleven said that the night before I fell she was in the Void looking for Eight..."

"Yeah..."

"And she saw me," Steve said. "She saw me in the Upside Down. *Before* I fell into the Upside Down. Except it wasn't me *then*, it was me *now*. She said I looked older, that I had long hair."

"Everybody just thought she was confused," Nancy muttered.

"She touched my arm," Steve said. "I was in the Upside Down and she touched my arm. The power flickered that night. That's how the new portal opened. That's the one I fell into. This is going to work because I've already done it."

Steve took a sip of Coke and watched Nancy have a very quiet nervous breakdown. "No..." She shook her head. "No no, you can't do this. Let's say all this is true, it still doesn't mean you'll change anything and if you *do* change something... That wouldn't be *good*, you'd be fucking with time, Steve. History. Reality. You can't just-

"It's not supposed to be this way," Steve said. "I *know* it isn't supposed to be this way. And the universe is giving me a chance to fix it."

"You think you can just find your younger self in the Upside Down and say 'hey, don't break Billy Hargrove's heart before graduation' and it will all work out?" Nancy said.

"No," Steve said. "I'll have to get swallowed by The Boss and then communicate with my younger self however it sees fit. That part's a little fuzzy, I admit."

"Fuzzy!"

"I'm going to do it," Steve said. "I already have. I can see why Eleven agreed to it too. She's a romantic."

"Like you," Nancy said, a little sadly.

"Always romantic," Steve said wryly. "Til fear got in the way."

Nancy crossed her arms atop the table. She'd forgotten all about her salad. "Steve... If it doesn't work, will you come back?"

His heart broke a little. He'd thought she'd understood this part.

"If it doesn't work... I'm assuming I'm gonna die. And if it does work then I'll be a different version of myself. So will you really. Everyone, I guess." He shrugged and ate a bite of his burger and washed it down with his Coke. "So either way, I guess this is goodbye."

“No.” Nancy shook her head. “No. Steve, this is completely insane-”

“Nance,” Steve said calmly. “I’m calling Eleven and then I’m flying to Chicago to pick her up and take her to Hawkins and then she’s opening the Gate and then I’m going to save Billy Hargrove’s life like he saved mine.”

“But Steve...” Nancy whispered. “You weren’t dead.”

“He doesn’t have to be either.”

Nancy chewed on her lip, blinked back tears. “I can’t believe this.”

He took her hand in both of his and kissed her thumb. “Look, if this does work, you won’t know the difference. If it doesn’t... I just... Thanks for always being a friend.”

Nancy sighed and said, “You really are an *idiot*, Steve Harrington.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, and smiled fondly. “Well, I’d have to be, wouldn’t I?”

2. It's All Over Now, Baby Blue

Hawkins

1985

"Where are you taking me?" Billy punched Steve's shoulder as they hiked up yet another incline and down again through the woods.

"You'll see," Steve said. He was carrying a backpack. He'd refused to show Billy its contents. He liked being mysterious, especially when it was for romantic purposes. Billy teased him about his romantic sensibilities, was annoyed even sometimes. But once in awhile he got this look in his eyes like he couldn't believe anyone cared enough to want to do something special. It broke Steve's heart a little, and made him want to do more and more.

"Here we go," Steve said, and grabbed Billy's hand, leading him through the edge of the woods and out onto a wide open flat of tall grass. They were on the fringes of Hawkins, beyond the quarry. It was dark and the place was deserted.

"Wow," Billy said dryly. "Grass. I'm so impressed, Harrington."

"Don't look up," Steve said, leading him out into the field. "C'mon..." Steve dragged him further and further out into the field and then abruptly stopped and stood in front of Billy. He looked around them and up at the sky and nodded. "Okay yeah, this is perfect. Sit."

Billy did not sit but fixed Steve with a wry smile.

"Sit down," Steve set his hands on Billy's shoulders and dragged him down with him into the grass. Billy went along, rolling his eyes. "Alright," Steve said. "I got...Doritos." Steve pulled a bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos out of his backpack.

"If you didn't bring Cool Ranch, I'm dumping your ass."

Steve fixed Billy with a seductive smile and pulled a bag of Cool Ranch out and tossed it at Billy.

“You know me so well,” Billy said.

“And I got...” Steve took a big green bottle out of his backpack and held it up with an air of triumph. “Champagne!”

“Champagne.” Billy nodded and laughed into his hand. “You are the corniest fucking cornball-”

“You love it,” Steve said.

Billy shrugged and pretended to examine a fingernail. “It’s stupid.”

Steve dropped the champagne in the grass and took the chips away from Billy and leaned over to kiss him, slow and deliberate. In the beginning Billy had tried to play Mr. Aggressive; rough kisses and fevered groping and hot sloppy sex. Until one day when Steve had thrown insecurity out the window and kissed Billy the way he suspected Billy truly wanted to be kissed and touched him the way he suspected Billy wanted to be touched; slowly, sweetly. Then things had changed. Steve liked to kiss Billy as if the universe depended on it, as if each time he could tell Billy via his lips *I love you, so shut up* and demand he believe it just a little bit more. By the time he drew away, Billy looked helpless, his eyes half closed. He tugged at the corner of Steve’s hoodie.

“That’s not fair,” Billy muttered. He started to look up and Steve slapped a hand over his eyes.

“Don’t look up!”

“Jesus.”

“I had a plan.” He held his hand over Billy’s eyes. Billy just sat there, letting him, a smirk growing on his face. His tongue snuck out to touch Steve’s wrist. “Lie down,” Steve ordered, and pressed him back. Billy lay down in the grass but he took hold of Steve’s wrist, his thumb rubbing at Steve’s pulse point.

“This plan better involve lube,” Billy said.

“Calm down and keep your eyes closed.”

Billy kissed his palm, though his eyes were shut. “Kinky, Harrington.”

“Chill,” Steve said and yanked his hand back, laying down beside his boyfriend. The grass was mercifully dry but it crunched under his clothes, even through Steve’s jacket. Steve took Billy’s hand, holding it between them. He watched Billy, obediently keeping his eyes shut, his blonde hair splayed out around his head like some deceptive halo.

“I am lying in the grass holding your hand,” Billy said, curling his lip. “Of all the ridiculous fucking cheeseball horseshit-”

“Open your eyes,” Steve said.

Billy blinked for a moment to adjust and Steve heard his breath catch. Billy was quiet for a long moment, his glittering eyes staring up at the night sky.

“Jesus,” Billy murmured.’

Steve turned his head to follow his gaze at the black-blue blanket crowded with shining stars. The place was a known stargazing spot in the region. Every kid who grew up anywhere near Hawkins came out to Gainer’s Field around fourth grade for an astronomy field trip. The field trip was fun but if you lived nearby, you knew to come here with as few people as possible and lie down in the middle of the flat stretch of grass, surrounded by the universe.

“Yeah,” Steve finally said.

“Feels like we’re floating in space,” Billy said. “Know any constellations?”

“I think *maybe* that’s Orion,” Steve said, pointing up at three stars all in a row. “And...that’s it.” He laughed at himself.

“It’s not,” Billy said. “It’s Andromeda.” His hand covered Steve’s and he moved it to a different jumble of stars. “And see that square with the little triangle right there is Pegasus. And...that house looking thing right there above Andromeda is Cassiopeia...”

Steve turned to look at Billy still staring up at the sky. "What the fuck, dude?"

"I used to have a thing for astronomy when I was kid alright?"

"So fuckin' sexy," Steve said sighing. He saw Billy grin at that. Steve sat up and took off his coat and grabbed the bottle of champagne. It took some struggling with the bottle opener but he popped the cork and brought the bottle to his lips, letting it foam over into his mouth. Billy watched him, his tongue between his lips. Steve moved to straddle Billy whose hands snaked up his chest as Steve took a drink. On impulse Steve rolled his hips into Billy who tipped his head back, pushing into it. Steve leaned over and tipped a little bit of champagne into Billy's mouth. Billy sputtered for a second and swallowed, looking up at him with bright blue eyes. Steve set the bottle in the grass and leaned down to kiss him and Billy's arms wrapped around his back. They writhed and kissed, Billy's breath hot on his neck and the urge to tell Billy what he'd been holding off on welled inside Steve. He'd been putting shit off, hemming and hawing, making decisions and then reversing them. But it was June and graduation was right around the corner. Now in this moment with Billy warm and solid beneath him, he felt more sure.

"I want us to go," Steve said, breathing hard. He pulled away, palming Billy's cheek. "After graduation. I know you want to get out of here so let's get out of here."

This had been a subject of multiple conversation that usually left Steve terrified on the subject of his future, *their* future.

Billy's mouth collapsed and he looked away towards the woods. "Don't play with me, Harrington. You can't take that shit back."

"I won't," Steve said. He ran his thumb over Billy's lips.

"You said you wanted to work for awhile, put money together." Billy looked so wary, he didn't trust good things sometimes. Steve wanted to put his doubts to rest.

"I did but...I know you gotta get out of this town, get away from him," Steve said. "Get out of that house... S'like watching you slowly

die living there. I don't want to be the reason you're miserable."

Billy sat up and their foreheads nearly knocked together they were so close. "I'm giving you one chance to back out," Billy said.

"We're staying together," Steve said and touched Billy's cheek, lightly with his fingers, turning his head to face him. "And we're getting out of here." They'd been together in one way or another since January, around the time Steve had found Billy hobbling down a wooded road in the snow with a fucked up ankle because he'd gotten hammered after a run-in with Neil and gone wandering off looking for somebody to fight. A lot had happened since then.

"You promise?" Billy murmured.

"I swear on my life," Steve said. "I love you."

Billy kissed him and pushed him back in the grass and they shed all their clothes and then Billy was propping himself up on his arms, hovering over Harrington, his hair falling around his face. Steve pushed a lock behind Billy's ear. Billy searched Steve's eyes, his expression a little lost. Steve had seen him look soft before, after the first couple months of his aggressive domineering facade, he'd opened up. But now he looked completely open, laid bare.

"Are you alright, baby?" Steve said.

"Steve," Billy said. "I love you too."

He'd never said it before and Steve felt the whole momentous truth of it and clutched his arms, bringing him close to kiss him and felt Billy hard against his stomach.

"Ah...I love you," Steve mumbled, trying to drown out his fears as Billy made love to him. "I love you. It'll be okay..."

When Steve was worried about something, he generally chose procrastination over action. Unless there were actual monsters involved. But in some ways, monsters were easier than the slow ugliness of hard life shit. On Saturday morning, Steve woke up with the memory of Billy still felt in his body. There was something so

satisfying about that soreness, that ache. He showered and if he concentrated he could still feel Billy's hand pressed to the middle of his back as he worked his way down...

He jerked off in the shower and got dressed.

It was time to talk to his parents. Procrastination was only going to make it harder. Better to rip the Band-Aid off. It was something he admired about Billy; his lack of hesitation. Billy acted when he needed to act. Steve dressed in khakis and a blue button-up his mother had bought for him: parent clothes.

It was seven which meant they'd be taking their leisurely Saturday breakfast at the table; croissants, fruit, coffee, the paper, muttering about political matters, sighs over finance. His parents started early on the weekend.

Steve didn't exactly know his parents *well* in some ways. Once he'd gotten high out of his mind with Billy and then gone home and talked to his parents, feeling the entire time, as if he didn't even belong to them. They were just nice yet disinterested people who let him live there and gave him clothes and were occasionally disappointed. That feeling had yet to go away even after the high faded.

"Good morning, Stevie," his mother said, eyes on the *The Wall Street Journal*.

His dad grunted.

"Hey." He sat down and poured himself coffee and grabbed a croissant.

"What're you guys doin'?" Steve said, shoving a piece of croissant in his mouth.

"Club," his mother said.

"Club," his father muttered. He was reading some businessy magazine.

His parents liked to go to some country club in Indianapolis whenever they got the chance. They'd dragged Steve along several

times. Steve had felt completely out of place, which was weird really. According to the status he had often enjoyed in school, he was *supposed* to the rich kid, child of privilege. But he was a Hawkins boy. Loch Nora was tony but it had never felt like that kind of tony, at least not to him. He had never really figured out why his parents lived in Hawkins to begin with. They seemed to despise the place. He'd tried to explain all this to Billy once. Billy had rolled his eyes and said Steve didn't know shit about shit.

Steve took a deep breath and said, "Hey, I have to tell you something."

"Hmm?" That was his mother.

"Mom," Steve said.

She looked up and seeing his serious expression she exchanged a significant look with his father. "Yes," his mother said. "Actually... we've been meaning to speak to you about something as well."

That made Steve nervous. He assumed it was another push for going to college after a gap year, following some help and influence admissions-wise. Which would not have been a terrible idea before, though what he had to say now made the whole thing moot.

"Okay..." Steve said.

"But go ahead," his mother said. "What is it?"

They turned their attention on him, which was intimidating. It didn't happen often.

"Right." Steve nodded, and geared himself up. "So I want to... After graduation, I'm *going* to...be...leaving Hawkins. I'm...going to leave." He sat back and took a deep breath as if that was everything he could possibly need to say.

His parents stared at him. He thought briefly of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

"Where are you planning on going?" His father said.

"Well, I'm not sure yet," Steve said. "Either California. Or New York. We haven't decided."

"We?" His father said.

They exchanged a look again.

Shit.

"Me and my friend," Steve said. "My friend and...myself."

"Your friend." His father slid his magazine aside and took a sip of coffee. Donald Harrington was a square jawed man who looked forever like he was about to sell you a hedge fund and only ever wore a golf shirt if he wasn't wearing a tie. Steve had never figured out what hedge funds were, but his father talked about them a lot. "I assume you're talking about this Billy...person."

"Yeah." Steve scratched his hand. "Billy Hargrove. Friend from school."

"And what are you going to do," his father said, "when you get to California or New York with no money?"

No money. Well, there went his idea of asking for a little bit to start off with. It wasn't as if his parents didn't have it to give but he'd suspected they wouldn't go for that.

"Get a job. Just...ya know. Live." He pursed his lips, staring hard at his half-eaten croissant. "Somewhere that's not here."

He was racked with anxiety and nobody had even raised their voice yet. He should have planned something to say, something that sounded better than "live."

His father laughed in that way that meant "you idiot." Steve had been on the receiving end of it countless times and seen others get it too. "Do you think we were born yesterday?"

"What?"

"Donald..." His mother said.

"No," his father said. "We knew this conversation was coming."

"You did?" Steve said. He thought the last time he'd been this scared, demodogs had been involved.

His father crossed his arms on the table and said, "You're *romantically* involved with this boy."

Steve couldn't breathe. He sat staring at his father. The walls started closing in.

"Um..."

"Oh Christ, Donald." His mother covered her eyes.

"Uh well," Steve said.

"You need to level with me," his father said. Maybe there was something to that but he'd only ever heard his father say that to people he was doing business with over the phone.

Jack, stop talking to me about ground floors. You need to level with me.

It pissed him off.

"Level with you," Steve said, sneering. "Why should I do that?"

"Oh, I don't know," his father said. "We're only your parents."

"Like you've ever given a shit," Steve said. "Now you think I'm gay, you're suddenly interested. That's great, that's just great." He picked at his thumbnail.

"*Are* you gay?" His mother said.

"I..." He licked his lips. If he got up and left, this conversation would only be coming back. He just had to suffer through it. He wished he was drunk. "I loved Nancy Wheeler. Alright? That wasn't like..a lie. Or something. Now I..." Steve looked hard at the flawless dark wood of the dining table and briefly pretended he was somewhere else. "Now I love him. I'm in love with him."

“Oh God,” his mother said.

“Calm down,” his father said to his mother. “We’re going to get through this.”

“Get through *what?*” Steve said. He couldn’t help but laugh. “I mean I know this probably seems really shocking to you but-”

“You’re not...” His father raised his eyes toward the ceiling as if seeking strength. “Listen to me, son. You are not throwing your life away for some youthful indiscretion or experimentation or whatever this is. I will not allow you to do that.”

“It’s not experimentation,” Steve said, his jaw a little clenched. “It’s a relationship.”

“Frankly,” his father said as if Steve hadn’t spoke, “if this Billy character was a girl, I’d still have reservations. Hasn’t the Chief of Police been down to that house several times? That entire family is trouble, Steve, they’re trash-”

“Don’t you fucking talk about him like that *ever*-”

“Stevie!” That was his mother.

“You don’t know what you’re signing up for,” his father said. “You have no idea. What he will bring with him? What kind of person he is? That’s not mention how hard it will be for the two of you together? You think you won’t be treated differently? If one of you gets hurt do you think they treat the other like family? They don’t. The legal ramifications alone...”

None of this had occurred to Steve and he didn’t want to listen. It shouldn’t matter, he told himself, it doesn’t matter...

“If somebody doesn’t want to give you an apartment,” his father said, “they won’t give you an apartment-”

“What are you you talking about?” Steve said. “We’d just look like roommates-”

“We figured it out. And what about AIDS, Steven-”

“Oh *Jesus*, we’re not gonna get fucking AIDS-”

“How do you know that? We will not help you. There will be no money from home. And you’re not taking that car either-”

“That’s *my* car-”

“I bought that car. This boy, this *relationship* will ruin you and I won’t allow it-”

“Why are you doing this...” Steve couldn’t breathe. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. He wished for demogorgons. Demogorgons would be a relief. “I’m eighteen, I’m eighteen, you can’t...stop me...”

His mother said, “I think you should give this some time.” She was ever the diplomat. Even her frosted feathered hair seemed poised to deflate threats. “Take the summer. I understand rebellion, Stevie, lots of children rebel-”

“I’m not a child.”

“Of course not.” She looked at his father like Steve was being ridiculous. “But I do think you’re acting out because you’re on the verge of real adulthood. This is a very important time. You take off half-cocked with this Billy Hargrove and it doesn’t work out and then you have nothing left and then what? If you stay here, maybe work for your father, at least for awhile-”

“And end this supposed relationship,” his father muttered.

Steve looked up sharply at that, ready to shout, but his mother covered his hand with hers. “No. We won’t talk about that just yet. You stay here. You don’t want to go to school, okay. We’ll find something ground level for you at your father’s firm. You need to think about the future, not just what feels good right now.”

“I promised him,” Steve said, tears welling him. “I can’t do that. I promised him we’d go. He hates it here. His dad is... It’s awful for him.”

“You can’t risk your whole future on someone else’s happiness,

sweetie.”

If he hadn't been panicking, Steve might have thought to say: *Why not?*

But he was and he didn't.

“Give me one good reason,” his mother said, “why you have to go *now* right after graduation, that's not ‘because Billy wants to.’”

“That...” Steve shook his head. “That is a good reason.”

“If he cares about you,” she said, “he'll understand this is a bad idea.”

“I think we should table this,” his father said darkly. He was up now, straightening his golf shirt, probably impatient to get to the club and forget his homo son over the links, Steve supposed.

“Okay,” his mother said, and patted his arm.

Steve sat there and watch his mother get up, smoothing down her tennis whites. They cleared their places and disappeared up the stairs and Steve was left alone at the table with his coffee, wondering what the hell had just happened.

On days when his parents were out, Steve always had Billy over. This time he hesitated by the phone in his room. He wasn't even sure where he stood now. He felt scrambled. His dad had come down hard but not the way Steve had thought he would. He hadn't seemed screamed at him just for boning a dude or anything. Some of his points had seemed valid even if the way he'd talked about Billy was awful. Maybe they could just take their time... The whole situation was making him freeze up. He picked up the phone.

Neil often spent Saturdays out with Susan, so calling Billy wasn't a problem. There was a schedule of good times to call and bad times to call. Once he'd called at a bad time and had to make up a complicated story about a school project. That was a close one.

Steve told Billy to come over and went downstairs to unlock the front door and walked out to the pool to smoke a cigarette.

He plopped down in a deck chair and stared out at the water where Barb had been taken.

The legal ramifications.

He shut his eyes, grimacing. He'd figured it wouldn't be a total picnic to be together with a dude, making a real life of it. It would certainly be easier in some place like New York or California, but he hadn't thought about all that nitty gritty stuff like medical rights or...wills or whatever it was his father had been talking about. Leases? Insurance? He wasn't even sure.

But did any of that really matter?

What job would he get anyway? It wasn't like he was qualified for anything in particular except defending kids from monsters. Retail. Fast food. He was getting a headache.

Steve was still quietly freaking out by the pool when Billy let himself in and eventually found him, bringing Cokes from the fridge. Steve didn't move, hearing Billy walk up behind him, but suddenly there was a hand stroking his hair which made him feel worse. Billy sat down on the edge of Steve's deck chair and handed him a Coke.

"Geez, what's the matter with you?" Billy said.

"Oh um. I talked to my folks," Steve said. He tapped the top of his soda can.

"I'm sure that played well," Billy said lightly.

"Yeah... Well. They know about us." He put down the Coke and watched Billy pale and just as he caught up to why Billy would be scared about that he realized the thought hadn't even occurred to him.

"Are they going to tell my dad?"

"No no. I don't think so."

“You don’t *think* so?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. They just... It was more about how hard it would be to like...be gay or whatever. I guess. Legal ramifications.”

“What?” Billy’s face twisted. It would’ve been funny in another context. “What legal ramifications?”

“I dunno like if one of us was in the hospital.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“And that we wouldn’t have money and they’d keep my car and shit and...”

Steve sat bracing himself on his wrists, staring at the pool as if there might be some answer found in the water.

In January he’d found Billy hobbling down that road in the snow and ended up taking him to the hospital. Billy had worn a brace on his ankle for a couple weeks. He’d been cranky as hell about it too, having to sit out basketball. For a few days, that’s all it had been between them; a strange favor Steve had done for the guy who’d once beaten the snot out of him. Then a couple days later he’d seen Billy outside the arcade with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, talking to Max, who was laughing. They had both been laughing. He’d tousled her hair. That made him curious. Then he’d seen Billy outside the middle school with Max, looking sheepish and shaking Lucas Sinclair’s hand. That made him *very* curious. Eventually curiosity had led to Steve and Billy making out in the BMW.

Steve put down the Coke and grabbed his cigarettes, tapping one out and fidgeting with it. He did smoke more often these days. Billy was a terrible influence in that regard.

Steve was in a daze. There was too much.

“You’re backing out,” Billy said quietly.

“I’m *not* backing out,” Steve said, training his eyes on the pool. “But they weren’t like completely wrong like... Maybe we’re going too fast or-”

Billy got to his feet and stared at Steve before turning away, looking out at the woods behind the pool.

“Man. I should’ve seen this coming.” He shook his head. “You already caved. Wow.”

“I didn’t *cave*,” Steve said. “They were just saying like maybe we should take some time, ya know. Plan or something. I could work for my dad-”

Billy laughed mirthlessly and threw his Coke to the ground. Steve watched it spill all over the pavement. “Work for your dad,” he said, turning back around. “Work for your...”

“Before last night, you were okay with sticking around a while-”

“That’s not the point, *Steve*,” Billy said. “What happened to I can’t watch you slowly dying and all that-“

“I *meant* that!”

“You’re full of SHIT!” Billy was shaking suddenly, his eyes wild, angry like the way he’d been angry in the beginning. Steve got to his feet and put his hands up in an attempt to calm him. Billy shoved him away. “You son of a bitch, you son a bitch... You can’t just say shit to people and then-”

“We can still go, what is the big-”

“It’s not the point!” Billy roared and Steve saw tears sliding down his face, heard him choke up. “They snowed you, idiot! You think they’re just going to let it go? First it’s stay in town a while and then your dad probably offers you a promotion when you want to leave, they’re gonna wear you *down*! It’s a con, you fucking asshole!”

“It’s not a *con*,” Steve said. Billy was sobbing and Steve tried to take his arm. “Baby...”

“Don’t fucking baby me, you liar,” Billy hissed, shoving him away again. “They’re going to tell my *father*. You don’t realize that, you dumb fuck?”

“Hey!”

“I *see* how they look at me when I come over, it’s not like I missed it,” Billy said, his voice thick. “They know! They’re not just going to let that shit *lie*. They’ll tell him! And then I’ll have to leave. That’s *why* they’ll tell him!”

Steve felt completely paralyzed. He stood, his arms at his sides, breathing too fast. “Maybe we could just.. Maybe we could just...”

“I’ll give you til graduation,” Billy said. “And then I’m fucking out of here.”

“Don’t...don’t do that.” Steve pressed his palms to his temples. “Don’t do that.”

“You promised me, Harrington,” Billy said. “I told you I loved-”

“What if we don’t last.”

That was the moment he thought about later. That was the very second he knew he’d fucked up everything. Steve looked at Billy and saw his heart break. He watched all the anger leave Billy’s eyes until there was nothing left at all.

Billy muttered, “What if we don’t...?”

“I don’t mean... I don’t mean we won’t,” Steve said weakly. “I’m just... I’m trying to be realistic-”

“Realistic. I’ve told you things I’ve never told *anyone*,” Billy said. “I...I gave you *everything*. I... Realistic?”

“I know. But...”

“But...” Billy said. “You don’t think this is worth it. You don’t think...*I’m* worth it.”

“I do, I just-”

“You can’t just have everything handed to you,” Billy said, his jaw so tight Steve thought his teeth would break. “Sometimes you have to

fucking jump when it's time to jump and you're too scared and I'm not worth it."

"Billy... I didn't *mean* that."

"Actions speak louder, you fucking..." Billy choked a little and wiped his eyes.

Billy was quiet and Steve racked his brain trying to think of a way to rewind everything, fix it just enough.

"Billy."

"Hey, don't sweat it, Harrington, " Billy bit out. "I've never been worth it to anyone."

He walked away and Steve followed until Billy whipped around and shoved him hard so that Steve almost lost his footing. Billy was barely able to speak through his tears. "Don't touch me, don't fucking t-touch me, you fucking..." He didn't finish sentence. He only kept walking and Steve could hear him still crying as he stomped through the house and the slam of the front door was like thunder.

Billy was gone and Steve felt sick. Impulsively he stripped to his underwear and dove into the pool, sinking to the bottom, shutting his eyes, wishing it all away. He smoked a half a pack of cigarettes, pacing the big empty house; his parents in his ear, Billy in his ear.

Eventually he ended up on the floor in the kitchen, sitting up against the fridge.

"I fucked up," he said finally. "I fucked up. I fucked up."

He closed his eyes and saw Billy crying. He'd *hurt* him. Maybe more than fists ever could.

Eventually Steve got off his ass, only to pace around the house again.

It was still okay to call Billy's house so he tried four times and Max picked up and eventually told him she was about to unplug the phone and *no* Billy still wasn't home. What the heck happened, Steve? Steve didn't tell her.

He got in his car and drove. He drove aimlessly at first and then turned around and headed into town, looking for Billy. He went to the diner. He bought a ticket to *Fletch* just in case Billy was at The Hawk. He wasn't. He found himself walking the length of the main drag in Hawkins, such as it was, checking everywhere. No Billy. He started worry Billy had already taken off, but he would've gone home first, Steve was sure. Max would've said that Billy had come by and taken all of his shit and left. He started to worry something had *happened*. While he was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, the air warm and the sky impossibly blue, Steve felt all once down inside his bones how much he loved Billy and also how petrified he was for life to change.

"Holy shit, you okay?" Jonathan jogged up to him on the sidewalk. "Steve. Hey, Steve?"

Steve was crying, which he didn't realize until a tear plopped onto his hand while he stood there hugging the mailbox.

"I fucked everything up," Steve said, staring blankly at Jonathan. "I fucked everything...I..."

Jonathan, by a quirk of circumstance, had become the first person to know about Steve and Billy. That had turned out to be a good thing, it occurred to Steve later, as nobody was likely to have reacted better than Jonathan, who had been smoking weed with him when Steve copped to it. Jonathan had just shrugged and said: "You love who you love, man." But that was Jonathan.

Jonathan dragged Steve over to his car and though Steve didn't feel at all willing or even able to talk, he somehow ended up parked at the quarry, smoking weed with Jonathan and spilling about everything. He felt marginally better when it was all out and he was a little high.

"You did fuck up," Jonathan said matter of factly as he sorted

through a heap of cassettes in his lap.

“Yeah, I figured that,” Steve muttered.

“Which part are you saying you fucked up though?” Jonathan said.

“What do you mean?”

Jonathan snorted a chuckle. “Dude. Did you fuck up by promising you guys would split right away or did you fuck up when you talked to your parents or did you fuck up when you said it might not last or-”

“I think it was all a fuck up.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said. “But what do you want to do? When you find Billy or talk to your parents again? Can’t just keep going with whoever’s pissed at you in the moment and make promises in the middle of ya know....”

“I’m too high for this,” Steve mumbled, but took another toke, before handing the joint over to Jonathan and slumping down in his seat.

“Listen to this, man,” Jonathan said, shoving a cassette into his tape deck. “This is R.E.M.”

Steve was floating. He saw things clear like the clear blue sky outside. Clear but terrible.

“I think if we take off it’ll all go shit,” Steve said. “I shouldn’t have promised him. It felt right at the time but...”

“Well...” Jonathan nodded. “Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“I dunno, man. If the Upside Down taught me anything it’s that life is really short. Better to take a risk, ya know? Grab life by the balls and all that.” Jonathan squinted as he took a drag.

“You’re grabbing life by the balls?” Steve said wryly.

“In my own way.”

“I dunno,” Steve said “It made me want to be more careful if anything.”

“Hargrove isn’t what I’d call careful,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah.”

“What if he splits without you?”

“He won’t.”

Jonathan’s eyebrows shot up. “Steve...”

“No, I know he’s really pissed right now but he won’t leave without me,” Steve said.

“Well...” Jonathan just shrugged. “I hope it works out.”

Jonathan drove Steve back to his car and Steve returned to scouring town for Billy and eventually gave up and went home. It was still okay to call Billy’s house and Max picked up, practically growling into the phone. Billy had stopped by, he’d been very upset. No, Max didn’t know where he went when he left. Steve hung up and watched shitty television and when it was dark he felt too edgy and alone to stick around the empty house.

At eight o’clock, just as Steve was putting on a jacket to go for a walk, the power flickered.

It startled Steve for a moment. Power flickers had something to do with portals. He stuck around for a little bit but nobody called or pounded on his door, so he went out walking, wandering into the woods behind the house. Just to be on the safe side, he took his bat and a flashlight.

He stayed on the fringes, not walking deep into the forest, and staying within eyesight of the Loch Nora houses, the light of his own living room still visible. He hummed one of the songs Jonathan had been playing in the car. His mind was a riot.

What if it doesn't last.

He couldn't reconcile how much he loved Billy--and he *loved* Billy--with his fear over what could happen, what might happen, what if what if...

The woods were dark, even this close to the neighborhood. He stumbled and fell into a crevasse, a slick muddy trench winding between the trees. It was too wet and steep to climb out of and he sighed heavily, picking a direction to walk in, figuring he'd find his way out eventually.

He didn't.

He'd also managed to drop his flashlight somewhere and couldn't find it again.

The crevasse just got steeper and steeper and he tripped on a root and ate shit, getting mud all over his clothes, partly falling on the bat and catching a little bit of nail in his hand which stung like hell and bled a little. It was useless to yell. There was nobody out here. He tried to quell his own panic. It was just the woods. No monsters, no Upside Down. Just stupid Hawkins woods-

The ground gave out under him.

He yelped and fell through mud and rock and landed hard in a tunnel.

"Fuck," Steve said. "Fuck. Oh fuck."

Steve started walking, breathing deep, trying to calm himself down. But he'd lost his sense of direction. He picked one branch of the tunnel and started walking. It was useless to try to get back up through the hole, impossibly high above him.

He thought he heard a growl and he still had his bat. He walked slowly, keeping it at the ready over his shoulder.

He thought he heard voices.

He thought he heard Billy's voice.

"I can do this." He shut his eyes. He'd been through this before.

But never alone.

"I can do this."

His hand was bleeding from having fallen on the nail bat.

He realized this just before something big and far too strong grabbed him and the world turned upside down.

He was being shaken, twisted, he couldn't stop screaming. Something sharp dug into his leg. Was he being eaten? He couldn't tell. Everything was a blur of darkness and then abruptly he was dropped.

Run.

He scrambled to his feet and a white hot pain shot up his leg. He fell back down.

It was snowing ash. The Upside Down wasn't cold or hot. Nobody had told him it was like that. It was as if the place had no temperature at all. Everything was dessicated. The corpse of Hawkins. He was sitting in black goo.

A demogorgon was running away from him.

Running away.

That was good, right, he thought. He braced himself on his elbows. His leg was killing him.

Why hadn't the demogorgon killed him?

"HOLY SHIT."

The sky overhead was black with the Mind Flayer. There were no stars, no clouds, no moon, just inky blackness that shifted and seethed. He'd seen Will's drawings. But this looked...bigger. It took up the *entire* sky, it's endless smoky tendrils reaching out in every direction to the hellscape of a horizon.

Steve had split his lip at some point. His head was pounding.

This is where I die, he thought.

A tendril was coming for him. He scrambled back and screamed. His leg was fucked up and he couldn't stand much less run.

The portal, where was it. If he could just get back to it-

A tendril was coming for him.

That's what had come for Will, but that had been a different monster.

"Billy, Billy, I love you, I'm sorry." He mumbled his last words just as a feeling like infinite emptiness came over him and then the black was pouring over him, lifting him off the ground. He was being swallowed. He felt time itself all around him; the beginnings and endings of things as if it were all an ongoing storm, felt the fabric between universes meeting somewhere--the Void-- and then everything was gone.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman, TWA flight 655 nonstop to Houston is now boarding. Once again, TWA flight 655 to Houston now boarding."

Steve blinked.

His heart was pounding. Their airport was busy and loud. Everyone was talking. He heard the low rumble of suitcases rolling across linoleum. He was sitting in a black seat affixed to other plastic seats. His shoes felt a little tight.

He was in an airport.

Wait...

I was sitting here, he thought. *I've been sitting here the whole time. ...Right?*

Steve felt weird.

He clutched the arms of his seat, fixed to the floor of a bustling gate looking out on an airfield. He watched a United 747 taxi and take off. He watched a woman with a shaved head hug a guy with long hair and ripped jeans before she finally broke away, blowing kisses before heading into the tunnel passageway connecting to a plane.

Tunnels.

It all came rushing back. He'd been in the tunnels under Hawkins. He'd been so upset. *Billy.*

"Shit."

Steve clapped his hands to his head. His hair felt too short. He was wearing a shirt and tie. A jacket was folded in his lap. A briefcase sat by his feet. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't-

"Boy, you don't like to fly, do ya?" A man said next to him. He had a neat little goatee. He wore a denim shirt tucked, bunched out over his jeans. Everyone's clothes looked off... Steve stared at the thin blue lines of his button down.

Why the fuck was he in an airport again?

"I don't know why I'm here," he said. He wasn't sure if he was speaking to the man next to him or to himself. "I don't remember why I'm here."

The guy looked at him like he might be crazy and went back to reading his paper.

The Chicago Tribune.

The date said April 3, 1993.

They snowed you, he heard Billy Hargove saying in his ear.

That had just happened. He'd just fucked up and shattered Billy's heart and then he'd fallen into the Upside Down.

But that made no sense because he hadn't seen Billy Hargrove in eight years. He was twenty-six, he lived in Chicago. That was right, but it didn't feel right at all either.

Billy.

A great feeling of dread came over him, an awful ache that was familiar, now growing, all encompassing. He had to go do this terrible thing. This terrible thing that was the end of the world. It would kill him. It was too late-

He jerked in his seat and a paper fluttered to the floor, it had been tucked under his leg, a narrow piece of cardstock. Boarding pass. Steve had a lump in his throat. His heart felt like a big knot in his chest.

I can't do this.

He wasn't supposed to be here.

This was wrong.

He picked up the boarding pass.

DEPARTURE GATE A33

TWA FL888 ORD NONSTOP TO JFK

4:15PM

New York.

"No." Steve shook his head. He had two lives in his head at the same time. Both of them felt correct, like an incredible sense of déjà vu.

This is some Upside Down shit, he thought. But it had been so long. But it hadn't been long at all.

He was going to New York because-

"No, no," Steve whispered.

He shut his eyes.

Steve was on a beach.

He was warm, he was lying on a towel, the sun was on his face. He was wearing shades and a barely there pair of trunks and nothing else.

“Hey there, sleeping beauty.”

Billy.

He turned his head and saw Billy Hargrove, shirtless in a pretty flashy pair of red trunks, braced on his elbow, grinning at him. His hair was wrong; long but different. He looked...happier, as relaxed as Steve had ever seen him. His eyes were brighter than the sky. He looked older too.

“Hey, sit up and let me lotion you. You’re gonna burn your ass off.” He held up a bottle of sunscreen. “You Indiana boys never learn.”

What the fuck is going on.

Steve just stared at him. The beach was crowded. Steve looked out at ocean waves rolling in. He heard thumping music coming from far away.

“Steve?” Billy said. He turned Steve’s head towards him. New York. The tunnels. ...*if it doesn’t last?* “What were you dreaming about?”